

# COMMENTARIES IN CULTURAL ENTOMOLOGY

## 2. THE MYTH OF THE LOUSE LINE

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**ABSTRACT:** The 16th Century Spanish colonial chroniclers las Casas and Oviedo relate the curious departure and return of lice from voyagers to and from the New World. A supposed line of longitude, approximately 100 leagues west of the Azores, marked the place of occurrence of the phenomenon. The idea shortly became obscure and is apparently only a myth.

Afflictions and discomforts universally met European travelers and mariners bound for the New World in the 16th century. With all the tribulations of the journey to bear, it may have been a consolation for some to believe that, during the voyage, they would escape their usual body lice and be freed from the bites of fleas. That this could happen was assured them by two of the earliest chroniclers of natural history in the West Indies, who vouched that these insects miraculously and mercifully disappeared from westbound ships reaching a hundred leagues beyond the Azores. Conversely, these same parasites emerged from hiding in great numbers on the eastbound passage at precisely the same meridian.

Writing from the West Indies where he served as missionary and apostle to the Indians from 1500 to 1547, Fr. Bartolomé de las Casas described the phenomenon in these words:

... for the trip to these Indies we see a singular and notable thing: that up to the Canaries and a hundred leagues this side, or in the vicinity of the Azores, many lice breed, but from there to here they all begin to die and upon arriving at the first islands, there is no man breeding a single one; on the return to Castile all the ships and the people proceed clean of these creatures until arriving at said limit; from there onward, as if lying in wait, they return in great and bothersome numbers. (1)

Gonsalo Fernández de Oviedo, contemporary and adversary of las Casas and official historian of the period in the Spanish colonies, related the same story, and more sharply delineated the zone of decontamination:

... for after passing by the meridian where the compass needle indicates the change of the southwesterlies to the northeasterlies, which is in the vicinity of the Azores, and travelling on a short distance in the course of our voyage on the westwind, all the lice borne by Christians and breeding on their heads and bodies die and disappear . . . and it

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is notable also how Christian men, clean in head and body from this filthiness in the Indies, when returning to Europe and again arriving at the same place in the ocean where the plague ceased before, suddenly, as if the lice were lying in wait for them, are reafflicted and not able to be free of them even though they change their shirts two or three times a day . . . This I have well verified, having made the trip four times myself. (2)

That these anecdotes were more than sea stories and with whom they actually originated is not known. The idea seems to have lost credence following its first accounting, since there appear to be almost no published verifications from the hundreds of subsequent sailing voyages made by other writers, historians and naturalists. Only a passage in a footnote in Sir Francis Drake's narrative of his circumnavigation of the world (1577-9), raises the issue again and provides us a clue as to how the myth of the "louse line" may have started:

Where unto also let me putt the third, a thing worthy the noting, that in our passing from our country, being winter, lice increased infinitely on the cloathes of our men, and were a great plague to many; but no sooner were wee com within the burning zone, but they all dyed and consumed away of themselves, so that till wee came beyond the southerly tropic to Braesilia, there was not to be found one among us. (3)

The louse (*Pediculus humanus*) is extremely susceptible to increases in temperature over the optimum provided by the normal heat of the human body. It is conceivable that the clothing and supradermal temperatures of voyagers to the tropics might easily rise above normal body temperature a critical 4 degrees F (2.2 degrees C) (4) and cause the demise of these ectoparasites. Clothing may have been shed also, reducing suitable habitat, the overall result being decrease in the louse population. That this would take place at a precise longitude, however, is fantasy.

Since the time of Drake, the myth seems to have eluded almost all further attention except for brief, relatively modern references in entomological works, all traceable to Oviedo's account (5,6,7). The treatment by las Casas appears to have escaped notice by entomologists, although it is well known to historians (8). We do not know if the original "observations" by las Casas and Oviedo were, in fact, independent and original. Both may have been repeating a sailor's tale, although both claim to be relating personal experience.

Another delightful, though oblique, literary allusion to the "louse line" occurs in Cervantes' famous novel, *Don Quixote*. During their ill-fated adventure on the "enchanted bark," when Sancho Panza asks how close they had come to the Equator, the errant knight replies:

The Spaniards, said he, and all those that Embark at Cadiz for the East-Indies, to know whether they have pass'd the Equinoctial-Line, according to an Observation that has been often experienc'd, need do no more than look whether there be any Lice left alive

among the Ship's Crew: for if they have pass'd it, not a Louse is to be found in the Ship, though they would give his weight in Gold for him.(9)

A final irresistible reflection on the myth derives from the fact that the place of parting between louse and man corresponded approximately to the first line of demarcation drawn through the Atlantic Ocean to separate the territorial claims of Spain (to the west) and Portugal (to the east). The particular meridian was suggested by Columbus and granted to the kings of the two countries in a Papal Bull dated 4 May 1493. Was the famous navigator really the first to discover the "louse line" and, owing his allegiance to Ferdinand and Isabella, to make sure that competing Portugal got the lousy side of the world?

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\*The format use in the literature citations above is consistent with the historical nature of this paper — Ed.